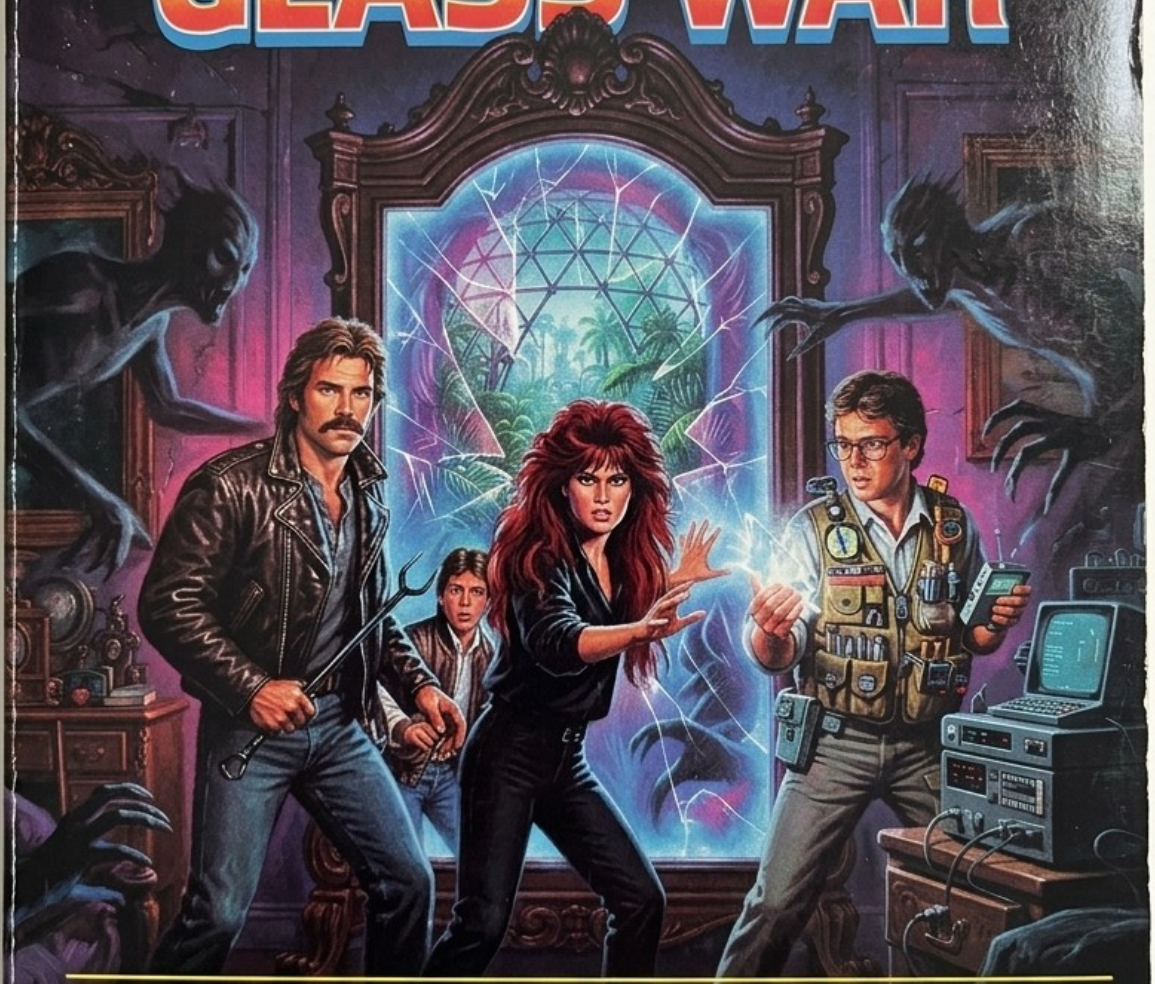
A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

By MATTHEW SPENCE

THE LOOKING GLASS WAR



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THE LOOKING GLASS WAR

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Chapter 1: The Looking Glass

Mike Steinman never set out to buy a haunted mirror. He just wanted something weird to hang on his bedroom wall. Something with character. Maybe a conversation piece. What he got instead was a seven-foot-tall Victorian monstrosity with dark wood, baroque carvings, and an oval of glass that shimmered faintly, even in shadow.

“It’s haunted,” the seller—a man with more teeth than necessary—said matter-of-factly. “Bought it off an estate in Vermont. Cold house. Smelled like cinnamon and mold.”

Mike squinted at his reflection. It seemed… not off, exactly. But somehow delayed. Like it took a second too long to catch up when he waved.

“I’ll take it,” he said. Mostly to see what kind of weirdness Steve and the others would say.

John, Steve, and Jennifer came over the next day to check it out. John leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking skeptical. Jennifer raised an eyebrow. Steve, of course, brought instruments.

“This isn’t just reflective glass,” Steve said after ten minutes of running a strange handheld scanner over the mirror’s surface. “It’s refracting light in a non-standard pattern. There’s a field behind it.”

“You mean like... it’s a portal?” Mike said, only half-joking.

Steve looked up, deadly serious. “Yes. I think it is.”

They stared at the mirror, silent. The surface rippled like water just once—subtle, blink-and-you’d-miss-it. Then John stepped forward.

“We doing this?”

“You mean go in?” Mike asked. “Dude, what if it eats us?”

Jennifer touched the frame. “Or what if it shows us something no one’s seen before?”

Mike sighed. “I was just hoping it would freak out the cat.”

They all stepped in together. The shift was instant. One moment they were in Mike’s room. The next, they were in a dense, lush forest—but with strange light above. The sky was not sky. It was a translucent dome, latticed with metallic ribs and studded with glowing nodes.

“What the hell…” John murmured.

Steve’s eyes scanned everything, calculating. “Artificial habitat. This is not Earth—at least, not current Earth. The mirror must lead to a future… maybe distant. This entire place is a controlled ecosystem.”

“No insects,” Jennifer observed. “And the trees look… perfect.”

They walked for an hour before they found him. A man, dressed in worn Victorian garb, sat beneath a tree. His beard was wild but his eyes were sharp.

“You came through the mirror,” he said, before they could even speak.

“Who are you?” John asked.

“My name is Elias Trenton. I built the mirror. In 1872.”

Steve blinked. “That’s impossible.”

Trenton smiled, tired. “It would be. If not for them.” He looked up at the sky. “The architects. The watchers. Aliens, if you like that term. They found my work, brought me forward. Preserved me. Studied me, even. They created this forest to understand our Earth. I’m the only human left they speak to.”

“You could come back with us,” Mike offered. “You built the thing. You deserve to go home.”

“This is home now,” Trenton said. “In your world, I’d be a relic. Here, at least I serve a purpose. Besides—someone must make sure the gateway is closed.”

As they prepared to leave, Trenton placed a hand on the mirror. “The glass is sensitive. The trip destabilizes it. Once you return… it will shatter. You won’t be able to come back.”

They nodded. He gave them a final smile. “Tell your world to stay curious. But not too curious.”

The return trip was like being yanked backward through water. When they landed in Mike’s room again, the mirror immediately cracked with a sound like thunder. Shards rained down, curling inward like leaves folding in on themselves. Within seconds, it was useless—just old wood and broken glass.

“Okay,” Mike said, brushing dust from his shoulder. “That’s twice now we’ve almost died for metaphysical nonsense. Anyone up for burritos?”

Jennifer didn’t laugh. She stared at the mirror. “He stayed behind. To keep the door shut.”

John nodded. “There was something… right about that.”

Steve pulled a fragment of glass from the floor, holding it up. It shimmered faintly, still catching echoes of light. “There are others,” he said quietly. “Other artifacts. Other doors.”

Mike grinned. “Are we starting a weird travel agency now?”

“Maybe,” John said. “Or maybe we just watch. Wait. Stay ready.”

As the sun set through the bedroom window, the four friends sat together, the broken mirror between them. Somewhere far ahead, beneath an alien dome, a forest still breathed, and a man from another century watched the stars through glass not his own. And the world, their world, felt just a little bit less ordinary.

Chapter 2: The Shard in the Scanner

The burrito place was quiet, but the air between the four friends hummed with an unspoken, electric tension. Mike kept checking his phone, half-expecting a cosmic alert, but the screen only showed mundane group chat notifications. Beside him, Steve was completely tuned out, ignoring his food entirely. He had placed the single, glowing shard of mirror glass inside a clear plastic specimen container next to his paper plate.

"Steve, eat your food before it gets structural," Mike said, nudging his elbow. "And put the alien glass away before the guy behind the counter charges us extra for glowing condiments."

Steve didn't blink. "The wavelength is shifting. Back in your room, it was pulsing at roughly forty hertz. Now it’s spiking whenever Jennifer speaks."

Jennifer paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean, when I speak?"

"It responds to biometric resonance," Steve explained, tapping the plastic container. "Specifically, vocal frequencies or neural intent. Elias Trenton didn't just build a mirror out of glass and wood. He engineered a psychological conductor. Jennifer was the last one to touch the frame before we left. I think she imprinted on it."

John leaned across the table, his heavy frame casting a shadow over the glowing shard. "If it's imprinted, does that mean the door isn't completely closed?"

"The physical portal in Mike’s room is gone," Steve said. "But the quantum entanglement? That's still active. If this shard is still talking to the other side, then whatever Trenton was guarding might know we left. Or worse, it knows how to track the signal back to us."

Jennifer reached out, her fingers hovering just inches above the plastic container. The shard inside flared, its pale blue light casting sharp, dancing shadows against her skin. "I can feel it," she whispered. "It doesn't feel hot or cold. It feels like a hum in the back of my teeth. Like someone is standing right behind me, breathing."

Mike swallowed hard, his appetite suddenly vanishing. "Okay, new rule. No one touches the ghost glass until we figure out if the 'architects' have a return-to-sender policy."

Chapter 3: Tracing the Blueprint

The next morning, the group gathered at Steve’s makeshift laboratory in his basement. The room was a chaotic maze of open computer towers, soldering irons, and old CRT monitors. In the center of his workbench sat the shard, now wired into an oscilloscope. The green line on the monitor wasn't a standard wave; it was drawing complex, repeating geometric shapes.

"I spent all night tracking the manufacturing history of that mirror frame," John said, tossing a thick manila folder onto the desk. "Trenton wasn't a ghost. He was a real guy. Clockmaker from New England. Disappeared from his workshop in Burlington, Vermont, in the winter of 1872. The local police thought he fell into the frozen lake."

"He didn't fall into a lake," Jennifer said, staring at the oscilloscope. "He fell into a trap."

Steve pointed to a second screen showing a map of the United States. "Look at the coordinates. I ran a historical database scan for similar light refractions. Trenton’s workshop wasn't an isolated incident. There were three other craftsmen in the late 19th century who vanished under identical circumstances. A silversmith in New Orleans. A lens cutter in Chicago. A blacksmith in San Francisco."

"Let me guess," Mike said, leaning over Steve's shoulder. "They all built something weird right before they vanished."

"Exactly," Steve nodded. "A pocket watch, a telescope lens, and an iron gate. All made with a specific alloy that shouldn't have existed back then. A mix of copper, iron, and a heavy isotope that matches the signature of this glass shard."

John gripped the edge of the table. "If Trenton was just one piece of the puzzle, what happens if someone collects the other three artifacts?"

"The architects didn't just take Trenton to study him," Jennifer said, her voice dropping an octave as she stared blankly at the screen. "They used him to anchor the web. The other three artifacts are still out there. And they're waking up."

Chapter 4: The Chicago Lens

The flight to Chicago was loud, cramped, and entirely too ordinary for a group of people tracking alien technology. Steve had smuggled the shard inside a lead-lined film bag, which luckily didn't trigger any airport security alarms. Their destination was the storage vault of the Adler Observatory, where the historic "Vanderpoel Lens" had been kept since it was taken out of commission in 1912.

"We have exactly twelve minutes before the night guard makes his second sweep," John said, using a modified electronic bypass tool on the security lock of the basement archive door. The lock clicked, and the heavy steel door swung inward with a low groan.

The air inside smelled of dust and old paper. Row after row of wooden crates lined the metal shelves. Steve pulled out his scanner, the screen instantly lighting up with an aggressive red pulse. "It's here. Aisle four, third shelf down."

Mike pried open the top of a crate marked *VANDERPOEL - 1888*. Inside, nestled in rotting black velvet, was a thick, pristine glass lens the size of a dinner plate. Unlike ordinary glass, the lens didn't reflect the overhead fluorescent lights. It seemed to swallow them, creating a deep, bottomless black void in its center.

"Don't touch it directly," Steve warned, reaching into his backpack for a pair of insulated rubber gloves.

But it was too late. The moment the lens was exposed to the air, the shard in Steve's pocket flared with blinding intensity. The lead-lined bag melted through his jacket, dropping to the floor. A beam of solid, piercing light shot from the floor, striking the center of the Vanderpoel Lens.

The room fell completely silent. The sound of traffic outside vanished. The shadows on the wall detached themselves from the objects creating them, stretching toward the ceiling like long, reaching fingers.

"Steve," Mike hissed, backing away. "The shadows are moving. The shadows are definitely moving."

Chapter 5: Shadows on the Wall

From the black center of the Vanderpoel Lens, something began to pour out. It wasn't liquid or smoke, but a localized distortion of space—like oil swirling on top of water. The temperature in the vault plummeted, their breath turning to thick white plumes in the sudden chill.

"The ecosystem," Jennifer said, her eyes wide as she stepped toward the lens. "It’s trying to replicate. The dome from the forest... it’s trying to open a door here."

"Jennifer, get back!" John shouted, grabbing her arm.

The moment John touched her, a shockwave of kinetic energy blasted outward from the lens, throwing both of them against the metal shelving. The crates rattled, spilling old star charts and brass telescope parts across the floor. Two dark, humanoid silhouettes formed from the shadows on the wall, stepping off the vertical surface and onto the solid floor. They had no faces, no features—just the sharp, jagged outlines of entities that didn't belong in three dimensions.

"They're not aliens," Steve muttered, his hands flying across his scanner as he backed toward the exit. "They're maintenance programs. Security drones left behind to clean up the anomalies."

One of the shadow figures lunged toward Mike. Without thinking, Mike grabbed a heavy brass astrolabe from a nearby shelf and swung it. The metal passed right through the figure, but the physical momentum threw Mike off balance, sending him crashing into Steve's workbench.

"Use the light!" Jennifer yelled, pulling herself up from the floor. She grabbed Steve's high-intensity halogen work lamp and flipped the switch, aiming the beam directly at the center of the room.

The brilliant white light tore through the dark figures. They shrieked—a sound like metal grinding against glass—and dissolved back into ordinary shadows. Steve quickly threw a heavy canvas tarp over the Vanderpoel Lens, cutting off the connection. The room returned to normal, the sound of distant Chicago sirens bleeding back through the walls.

"Two down," Mike panted, wiping sweat from his forehead. "And I think I just pulled a muscle fighting a literal shadow."

Chapter 6: The Southern Resonance

With the Vanderpoel Lens wrapped securely in layers of rubber and lead insulation, the team drove south through the night, heading toward New Orleans. The silver pocket watch created by Jean-Baptiste LeRoux in 1895 was currently listed in the inventory of a private occult museum in the French Quarter.

"The watch doesn't just distort light," Steve explained from the passenger seat of Mike's SUV, looking over his data. "According to LeRoux's surviving journals, it distorts local temporal progression. People who stood near it claimed they could hear conversations that hadn't happened yet."

They arrived at the museum just as dawn was breaking, the humid southern air smelling heavily of jasmine and damp stone. The museum owner, an elderly woman named Madame Vance, was already waiting for them on the porch, rocking slowly in a wicker chair.

"I knew you were coming," she said before Mike could even knock on the gate. "The watch told me three days ago. It hasn't stopped ticking since your mirror broke in Vermont."

She led them into a back room filled with ironwork and old voodoo dolls. On a velvet pedestal sat a heavy silver pocket watch, its casing covered in intricate, microscopic engravings of eyes. The ticking sound was deafening, filling the room like the steady, heavy beat of a giant heart.

"It’s counting down," John said, his hand resting instinctively on his belt. "To what?"

"To the alignment," Madame Vance said, her eyes clouded with cataracts as she looked at Jennifer. "The architects are lonely. They built their cages, but they forgot how to feel the sun. They want to bring the whole world inside the dome where nothing ever dies, and nothing ever grows."

Jennifer stepped toward the pedestal. As she got closer, the ticking sound slowed down, matching the rhythm of her own pulse. "They aren't trying to destroy us," she realized, her voice echoing strangely in the small room. "They're trying to preserve us. Like dried flowers in a book."

Chapter 7: The Clockmaker’s Legacy

The watch began to spin its hands backward, the silver casing glowing with the same pale blue light as the mirror shard. Suddenly, the walls of the museum seemed to fade, replaced by a

flickering montage of images: Elias Trenton building his mirror in 1872; Vanderpoel polishing his lens in 1888; LeRoux assembling the watch in 1895.

"They were all working together," Steve said, his scanner recording the temporal distortion. "Not across distance, but across time. The architects gave them the designs through their dreams. It’s a distributed network."

"If we destroy the watch, does the network collapse?" John asked, raising a heavy iron poker from the fireplace.

"No!" Jennifer cried, stepping between John and the pedestal. "If you break it violently, the temporal feedback will trap this entire city in a five-second loop forever. We have to harmonize the signal. We need the final piece."

"The San Francisco gate," Mike said, checking his watch. The digital face was spinning wildly, numbers blurring into static. "The iron gate at the old Spanish mission. We need to get there before the countdown hits zero."

Madame Vance picked up the watch using a silk handkerchief and handed it to Jennifer. "Take it, child. You're the one they're listening to. But remember—when you look through the glass, the glass looks back. And it has a very long memory."

Chapter 8: The Iron Gate

The flight across the country was a nightmare of malfunctioning electronics. Every screen on the airplane glitched with static whenever Jennifer walked past, and Steve had to constantly recalibrate his equipment to keep the artifact signatures from alerting the cockpit.

They landed in San Francisco under a thick blanket of rolling fog. The old mission sat on a lonely hill overlooking the bay, its white adobe walls crumbling with age. In the courtyard stood the final artifact: a massive, wrought-iron gate that led to nowhere, its bars twisted into impossibly complex fractals that hurt the eyes to look at directly.

"This is it," Steve said, his scanner practically screaming with feedback. "The focal point. The lens, the watch, and the mirror shard... they're all designed to plug into this gate."

As John and Mike unloaded the insulated crates from the rental car, the fog around the mission began to solidify. It didn't lift; it grew thick, heavy, and metallic, forming a massive, translucent dome over the entire hill. The sky above turned from gray fog into a grid of shimmering metallic ribs and glowing nodes.

"It’s happening," Mike said, his voice dropping. "The habitat is expanding. It’s overtaking the city."

From the center of the iron gate, a silhouette appeared. It wasn't a shadow drone this time. It was a man, his form wavering between reality and light.

"Elias?" Jennifer called out, stepping forward into the courtyard.

The figure solidified, revealing the worn Victorian clothes and sharp eyes of Elias Trenton. But his expression wasn't tired anymore—it was completely hollow, his eyes glowing with the steady, artificial light of the dome above.

"The curation must be completed," Trenton said, his voice sounding like thousands of people speaking in unison. "The specimen must be secured. Welcome home."

Chapter 9: The Curators

"He’s not Trenton anymore," John said, stepping in front of Jennifer with his arms raised. "They're using him like a puppet. A transceiver."

"Elias!" Mike shouted, trying to reach through the barrier of cold air that surrounded the gate. "You told us to stay curious! You told us to keep the door shut!"

"The door is shut," the Trenton-entity replied, its arm lifting with a smooth, unnatural precision. "The old world is chaotic. It decays. Here, within the lattice, there is no rot. There is no death. There is only the perfect, endless afternoon."

Behind Trenton, the iron gate began to swing open. Through the bars, they could see the endless, perfect forest from Mike’s mirror, but it was expanding, swallowing the mission walls, the trees of San Francisco, the distant lights of the bridge. The ground beneath their feet shifted from dirt to perfectly manicured, synthetic grass.

Steve dropped to his knees, frantically typing into his modified laptop, trying to broadcast a counter-frequency using the Chicago lens and the New Orleans watch. "I can't break the loop! The architectural override is too strong. It's using Jennifer’s biometric signature as the master key!"

Jennifer looked down at her hands. The silver watch was ticking violently against her palm, and the mirror shard in her pocket was burning hot. She realized then why she had been able to feel the glass from the very beginning. She wasn't just a observer. The architects had chosen her to be the next curator.

"They don't want to destroy us, Mike," Jennifer said quietly, turning to face her friends. "They want me to run the machine. If I step through, they'll leave the rest of Earth alone."

Chapter 10: The Master Key

"Like hell you're going," John said, grabbing her shoulder. "We started this together. We finish it together. No one gets left behind in an alien greenhouse."

"John's right," Mike said, stepping up beside her. "We're not trading you for a lifetime of perfect weather and no burritos. Steve, tell me you've got something."

"The network relies on symmetry," Steve said, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at the crashing code on his screen. "Four artifacts. Four creators. Four of us. Jennifer isn't the key—we *all* are. The mirror responded to all four of us stepping through together in Mike’s room. If we break the symmetry, we break the system."

"How do we break it?" Jennifer asked, the glowing nodes of the dome overhead beginning to pulse in a terrifyingly fast rhythm.

"We don't destroy the artifacts," Steve said, standing up and holding the Vanderpoel Lens high in the air. "We overload them with asymmetrical data. We feed them our own feedback loop."

Steve threw the lens toward John, who caught it cleanly. John then smashed the lens down onto the silver pocket watch resting on the pedestal of the iron gate. At the same moment, Mike grabbed the glowing mirror shard from Jennifer’s pocket and jammed it directly into the twisted iron filigree of the gate's lock mechanism.

The Trenton-entity let out a sound that wasn't human—a sharp, digital screech that shattered the windows of the old mission. The perfect forest behind the gate began to pixelate, tearing away like old wallpaper to reveal a cold, empty void of stars.

Chapter 11: Breaking the Lattice

The world became a storm of light and sound. The metallic ribs of the dome groaned under immense structural stress, bending and snapping like thin wires. The synthetic forest screamed as the local reality began to reject the artificial ecosystem.

"Hold on to each other!" Mike yelled over the roaring wind.

The four friends linked arms, forming a tight circle in the center of the crumbling courtyard. The iron gate began to melt, its heavy metal bars running like water, glowing with an intense, blinding white light. Elias Trenton’s form began to dissolve, but just before he vanished into the light, his eyes cleared. The hollow glow disappeared, replaced for a single second by the tired, grateful eyes of the clockmaker from 1872.

"Thank you," he whispered.

With a final, deafening crack that felt like the sky itself tearing in half, the dome shattered. Millions of glowing, crystalline shards rained down over San Francisco, dissolving into harmless mist before they even touched the ground.

The heavy fog rolled back in, ordinary and cold. The ancient mission was quiet once more. The iron gate was gone, leaving only a scorched, empty stone archway in the grass.

Mike fell back onto the grass, panting, his jacket covered in soot. He looked around at Steve, John, and Jennifer. They were bruised, exhausted, and completely covered in dirt, but they were all there.

"Is everyone in one piece?" Jennifer asked, her voice shaking slightly but clear.

"Physically? Yes," Steve said, checking his completely dead scanner with a faint smile. "Metaphysically? We're probably going to have a lot of trouble using electronic devices for the next few weeks."

John stood up, brushing off his jeans, and looked out over the bay where the city lights were slowly turning back on, normal and beautiful. "So. No more antique shopping. Ever."

Mike grinned, pushing himself up from the ground. "Agreed. But hey... the travel agency idea is still on the table. We just need to find a door that doesn't try to kidnap us first."

As the four friends walked down the hill together, leaving the empty archway behind, the world around them felt immense, mysterious, and perfectly, wonderfully ordinary.